

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission dedicated to monitoring the universal right to freedom of religion or belief, urges the Obama Administration during its second term to promote religious freedom as both a pivotal human right and a practical necessity. Religious freedom is a fundamental human right that encompasses other freedoms -- including those of expression, association, and assembly. It serves as the proverbial canary in the coal mine, as it often is the first freedom taken away. Recent studies have also shown that restrictions on religion are rising worldwide, and with that, an increase in societal hostility and instability. Consequently, religious freedom has real national security relevancy, as conditions supporting religious freedom can help combat the rise of violent religious extremism.

USCIRF is committed to working with the Administration and encourages the U.S. government, across agencies, to utilize the expertise of the Commission. USCIRF recommends that the Obama Administration implement the following actions.

At the White House

1. National Strategy: Create a White House national security strategy, presidential directive, or Executive Order to guide U.S. government's promotion of international religious

freedom and ensure that this strategy is also reflected in the next Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) and as appropriate in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR).

2. Interagency Working Group: Establish an interagency working group at the National Security Council to coordinate a whole-of-government effort on religious freedom, including civilian and defense agencies and USCIRF, and staff this initiative with the Director-level position provided by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

3. Individual Country Strategies: Develop individual country strategies that promote religious freedom, in consultation with USCIRF and nongovernmental organizations, to leverage both U.S. government influence and partnerships with advocacy organizations and religious communities.

4. Appointments: Whenever vacancies occur, quickly appoint an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and appoint Commissioners to USCIRF.

At the State Department/USAID

1. All Tools on Deck: Utilize all the tools provided to the U.S. government by IRFA, including annually designating “countries of particular concern” (CPCs) after the issuance of each State Department religious freedom report; undertaking robust diplomatic engagement of CPC countries through the use of binding agreements; and ending the use of “double hatted” sanctions towards non-reforming governments by applying specific actions directly related to religious freedom violations.

2. Training of Diplomats and Military Personnel: Require that all diplomats at the Foreign Service Institute and relevant members of the military receive training on the importance of religious freedom and practical ways to best promote this freedom as an aspect of U.S. foreign policy, so that Foreign Service officers, U.S. service members and military chaplains can more effectively engage with religious leaders and government and military officials in countries of concern.

3. USAID and Other Entities: Task USAID with developing and disseminating education materials on human rights, religious freedom, and the importance of interfaith understanding for the achievement of development objectives in countries of particular concern and fund teacher training initiatives to support this effort. Also ensure that the National Endowment for Democracy, the U.S. Institute of Peace and other entities dispersing federal funds for grant making undertake specific programming on religious freedom.

4. Liaise with NGOS and Religious Communities: Formally establish a mechanism within the State Department to liaise with NGOs and religious communities working on religious

freedom issues, such as continuing the Working Group on Religion and Foreign Policy, to improve the U.S. government's ability to promote religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and stability, and more fully involve USCIRF in its effort.

At the Office of International Religious Freedom

1. The Ambassador's Position: Strengthen the position of the Ambassador-at-Large by giving the Ambassador clear oversight and management authority of the IRF Office, and have the Ambassador chair a working group with other religiously oriented positions and programs at the State Department to ensure consistency in message and strategy.

2. The Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF): Empower the Office of International Religious Freedom so that it is the central location for all State Department religious freedom and religious engagement efforts by, among other efforts, enlarging its staff and deepening its expertise, and providing at least \$4 million annually in dedicated programmatic funds for religious freedom promotion/protection.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner please contact Samantha Schnitzer at (202) 786-0613 or sschnitzer@uscirf.gov.